INTRODUCTION

"THE VOICE OF the poor can generally be heard only through records and observations compiled by their literate social superiors, from the tax collector to the inquisitor's clerk, and from the judge of criminals to the benefactor of the helpless."[1] What the distinguished historian of poverty and charity, Brian Pullan, says about early modern Italy—an observation that holds true for most of premodern European history and for the Islamic world as well—makes the voices of the poor heard in this book almost unique. Though emanating from one of the marginal groups in world history, the documents translated here help close a much lamented gap in premodern social history, offering intimate insight into an important and central problem in human history. They present a vivid case study illustrating not only medieval Jewish life but also structural aspects of poverty and charity that are only vaguely visible in the Christian and Islamic pasts.

Compiled for the benefit of students, scholars, and the general reader, the anthology comprises a representative sample (94 in total) of the some 485 letters, 315 alms lists, donor lists, and other accounts used in the author's *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt*.[2] That book presents a full analysis and interpretation of those documents, as well as of Maimonides' contemporaneous laws about charity. The vast majority of the documents are hitherto unpublished and most of them are herewith being made available for the first time in any format.

The letters of the poor, whether written in their own hand or dictated to a scribe or family member, recount a panoply of hardship, suffering, and strategies for obtaining relief. From a somewhat different angle of vision, letters of recommendation on behalf of the poor illustrate, in addition to the plight of the poor, the attitude of the more fortunate members of society toward poverty and its relief. The alms lists and donor lists show how benevolent Jews fulfilled a time-honored obligation, or *miṣva*, in Judaism through public charity. Seemingly

[1] Brian Pullan, "Support and Redeem: Charity and Poor Relief in Italian Cities from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century," *Continuity and Change* 3 (1988), 179.

[2] Princeton University Press, 2005. References below to chapters in *Poverty and Charity* can usually be pinpointed with the aid of the "Index of Geniza Texts" there.

rather dry at first glance, these lists take on vibrant life when subjected to the kinds of questions that animate this study. They allow us to hear the voice of the poor, too, although it is a silent voice.

The Cairo Geniza

An ancient Jewish custom with roots in the period of the Mishna (codified 200 C.E.) and Talmud (ca. 200–500 C.E.) prohibits the destruction of pieces of sacred writing—in theory, fragments of the Bible containing God's name but in practice anything copied or printed in the Hebrew script. These papers must be buried in a *geniza* (the word *geniza* means both "burial place" and the act of "burying"). Normally, a geniza is located in a cemetery. But the Cairo Geniza was special. For various reasons, not fully understood to this day,[3] it was situated behind a wall *inside* the synagogue, the so-called Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat (Old Cairo), which dates back to the Middle Ages and possibly even to pre-Islamic times.[4] This had two fortunate consequences. One, the contents of this Geniza were concentrated in one space and easily accessible, once it was discovered. Two, because Egypt is such an arid country, the pages buried there stood the test of centuries, without molding, so that even when a page is torn or riddled with holes, the ink can be read today almost as clearly as when it was copied, as long as a thousand years ago. Not well known, the Jewish custom of geniza has its parallel in Islam, mainly for Qurʾān fragments but also for other religious literature and even documents from everyday life.[5]

It has been estimated that the Cairo Geniza contains upward of 210,000 items (shelfmarked fragments) of handwritten text. When individual folios are counted the total rises to around three-quarters of a million. The vast majority are leaves from books, such as medieval Hebrew poetry, rabbinic fragments, midrashic texts, philosophical works, magical texts, and liturgical fragments (usually pages from prayer books). Surprisingly, the cache also includes a wide variety of individual documents from everyday life, many of which we would call "secular." They date mostly from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries and comprise letters, court records, marriage contracts, deeds of divorce, wills, accounts,

[3] See Mark R. Cohen and Yedida K. Stillman, "The Cairo Geniza and the Custom of Geniza among Oriental Jewry: A Historical and Ethnographic Study" (in Hebrew), *Peʿamim,* no. 24 (1985), 3–35.

[4] See Phyllis Lambert, ed., *Fortifications and the Synagogue: The Fortress of Babylon and the Ben Ezra Synagogue, Cairo* (London, 1994).

[5] See my "Jewish and Islamic Life in the Middle Ages: Through the Window of the Cairo Geniza," in a book on Jewish-Islamic creative coexistence to be edited by Joseph Montville. Also Joseph Sadan, "Genizah and Genizah-Like Practices in Islamic and Jewish Traditions," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 43 (1986), 36–58 and my "Geniza for Islamicists, Islamic Geniza, and the 'New Cairo Geniza,'" lecture given at Harvard University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, February 12, 2004, to be published in the *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review.*

book lists, lists of recipients of charity and of gifts for charitable purposes, as well as official documents, such as petitions to be submitted to Muslim authorities (and hence written in Arabic script). These individual fragments, which we call the "historical documents" (as opposed to the literary fragments mentioned above) constitute perhaps 5 percent of the Geniza as a whole. Though many are in Hebrew or Aramaic, most are written in Judaeo-Arabic, that is, Arabic in Hebrew characters and displaying grammatical and syntactic features differentiating it from the Arabic of the Qur'ān and all other medieval Arabic writings (classical Arabic). The Geniza also contains fragments from Islamic books, even pages of the Qur'ān in Hebrew transcription, signs of the well-known cultural embeddedness of the Jews in Arab-Muslim society of the Middle Ages. The Jewish documents from the Geniza confirm that the so-called classical Geniza period (eleventh to mid-thirteenth centuries) was one of relatively peaceful coexistence, especially compared to the high Middle Ages in northern Europe.[6]

Discovered at the end of the nineteenth century, the contents of the Geniza were dispersed among more than twenty libraries and private collections, from Cincinnati, Ohio, to St. Petersburg, Russia.[7] More than one hundred years of research on these fragments have produced more knowledge about Jewish life and literature in the Islamic Middle Ages than can easily be imagined. In particular, the historical documents have revealed aspects of economic, social, and family life, as well as of material culture and the mind of the individual, that were previously completely unknown.

The Voice of the Poor in World History

The voice of the poor that we hear in the Geniza documents stands in bold relief on the canvas of the world history of poverty. Sources for antiquity, medieval Christendom, and medieval Islam largely lack it. Roger Bagnall notifies the readers of his lavishly detailed study *Egypt in Late Antiquity* that "almost all [of the Greek papyrological evidence] comes from the viewpoint of the propertied classes of the cities of Egypt," and that the Coptic papyri from everyday life, which do not become common until long after the Council of Chalcedon

[6] This comparison is explored in my *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1994).

[7] See the Introduction to S. D. Goitein's *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967–93), in volume 1 (1967) (hereafter *Med. Soc.*), as well as Stefan C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection* (Richmond, Surrey, 2000). Microfilm copies of most or all of the Geniza manuscripts are held in the Institute of Hebrew Microfilmed Manuscripts in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, Cambridge University Library in England, at Yeshiva University, and the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Subsets of the entirety are available in photocopy or microfilm at other institutions, for instance, Tel Aviv University, Princeton University, and Emory University.

(451), emanate largely from the Christian monasteries. *"[T]his too is not the viewpoint of the poor."*[8] The situation does not improve for the period after late antiquity. Historians of poverty in medieval and early modern Europe like Brian Pullan have noted with regret that the materials at their disposal do not include the voices of the indigent masses. Assessing, for instance, "the complex attitudes and responses that poverty evoked" in medieval Europe, Michel Mollat—to cite one example from among many—laments that the evidence available to him "generally exhibits only one point of view, that of the non-poor casting their gaze upon the poor."[9]

Things are no better for the world of Islam. "Given the absence of sources for statements by the poor," Adam A. Sabra, author of a pioneering book on poverty and charity in Mamluk Cairo, laments, "the ideal task of determining how the poor saw their own fate is next to impossible."[10] In his masterful bibliographical survey of Middle Eastern historical studies, Stephen Humphreys cites the methodological obstacle with regard to the peasantry as a whole (who were not

[8] Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993), 5 (emphasis mine).

[9] Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New Haven and London, 1986), 2. In her study of poverty in medieval Cambridge, Miri Rubin writes "we are usually much better informed about the identity of the giver, the founder, donor or testator, than we are about the recipients." *Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1987), 6. Sharon Farmer notes the same deficiency in *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris: Gender, Ideology and the Daily Lives of the Poor* (Ithaca and London, 2002), 3–4: "Historians who have focused on the actions and perspectives of propertied members of medieval society have produced numerous studies of hospitals and hospices . . . ; of charitable almsgiving in urban wills; of the attitudes toward the poor. Occasionally, but not often, studies of hospitals and confraternal charity offer a profile of the recipients of such charity, but the sources left behind by medieval hospitals and confraternities *reveal almost nothing about their daily lives*." Her book seeks partially to make up for this deficiency with evidence from "testimonies" of poor people claiming to have received a miraculous cure at the shrine of St. Louis. In her study of poverty and welfare in Habsburg Toledo, Linda Martz begins her chapter on the "recipients of relief" with a confession: "The bulk of the extant records have to do with the finances of charitable institutions or with the individual who was wealthy enough to make a last will and testament, while the recipients of poor relief remain colourless and vaguely defined individuals in among the mass of humanity known as the poor." *Poverty and Welfare in Habsburg Spain: The Example of Toledo* (Cambridge, 1983), 200. Paul Slack, discussing *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London and New York, 1988), notes (p. 7): "The sources seldom allow the poor to speak for themselves." The problem persists even at the beginning of the modern era. Gertrude Himmelfarb laments: "There is one kind of source the historian would dearly love to have: the direct testimony of the poor themselves. . . . What we do have, by way of working class sources, are documents more often addressed to the working class than originating with them." See *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (New York, 1984), 14. Carlo Ginzburg reminds us that this is a general problem when writing about the non-elites in the European past: "[T]he thoughts, the beliefs, and the aspirations of the peasants and artisans of the past reach us (if and when they do) almost always through distorting viewpoints and intermediaries." *The Cheese and the Worms*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1980), xv.

[10] Adam Sabra, *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Egypt, 1250–1517* (Cambridge, 2000), 8.

all poor) under the rubric "The Voiceless Classes of Islamic Society."[11] The tiny handful of letters from or on behalf of needy persons thus far discovered among the Arabic papyri and fragments on paper from Egypt and in the so-called archive (probably an Islamic geniza) of a thirteenth-century merchant from the Red Sea Port of Quseir al-Qadīm bear significant similarities to the Judaeo-Arabic letters from the Geniza, and it is to be hoped that the numbers of such Muslim letters will grow as research on the papyri and on Arabic letters on paper dating from even later than the papyri progresses.[12] Similar headway can be made now for European history thanks to research on recently discovered "pauper letters" from early industrial England and from the continent of Europe—an enterprise consciously aimed at making up for a lacuna in the sources for social history.[13]

[11] R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, rev. ed. (Princeton, 1991), 284–308.

[12] Yūsuf Rāġib, *Marchands d'étoffes du Fayyoum au III^e/IX^e siècle d'après leurs archives (actes et lettres), II La correspondance administrative et privée des Banū ʿAbd al-Muʾmin* (Cairo, 1985), 44–46. Werner Diem, *Arabische Briefe auf Papyrus und Papier aus der Heidelberger Papyrus-Sammlung. Textband* (Wiesbaden, 1991), 212–15 (12th century) (it is not certain that the recommendee of this letter was in financial need; he is a foreigner, being introduced to a dignitary, who is asked to "help him"); 227 (9th century) (an appeal for assistance, *laysa bi-yadī nafaq[a]*, "I have no sustenanc[e]"); 277 (11th century) (letter of appeal to fulfill a promise to give a gift for the writer's wedding, *fa-in tafaḍḍala sayyidī wa-mawlāya an yaʾmur . . . bi-qalīl qamḥ mā amkana ḥattā yakūn nafaqatan*, "please be so kind as to order . . . (for me) a little wheat, insofar as is possible, for my sustenance"; and idem, *Arabische Privatbriefe des 9. bis 15. Jarhunderts aus der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Wien. Textband* (Wiesbaden, 1996), 183–84 (13th century or later) (letter of appeal for clothing); Li Guo, "Arabic Documents from the Red Sea Port of Quseir in the Seventh/Thirteenth Century, Part I: Business Letters," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 58 (1999), 186–90. The relevant letter, as I understand it, is a petition from a needy person seeking assistance for himself and his family. See my discussion of these documents in "Geniza for Islamicists, Islamic Geniza, and the 'New Cairo Geniza.'"

[13] Acknowledging the lacuna for England, a recent collection of essays attempts to find and exploit "the words of the poor" fortuitously preserved in parish records and so write the history of poverty "from below." *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640–1840*, ed. Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, and Pamela Sharpe (New York, 1997), see esp. the editors' introduction and the essays by Pamela Sharpe, " 'The Bowels of Compation': A Labouring Family and the Law, c. 1790–1834"; James Stephen Taylor, "Voices in the Crowd: The Kirkby Lonsdale Township Letters, 1809–36"; Thomas Sokoll, "Old Age in Poverty: The Record of Essex Pauper Letters, 1780–1834." See also Pamela Sharpe, "Survival Strategies and Stories: Poor Widows and Widowers in Early Industrial England," in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (Essex, 1999), 220–39. See also Thomas Sokoll, "Negotiating a Living: Essex Pauper Letters from London, 1800–1834," *International Review of Social History* 41 (2000), 19–46; the collection, *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731–1837*, ed. Thomas Sokoll (Oxford, 2001); the collection of letters, petitions, examinations, and depositions regarding the poor sojourning outside their parish of settlement at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, James Stephen Taylor, *Poverty, Migration, and Settlement in the Industrial Revolution: Sojourners' Narratives* (Palo Alto, 1989). The same goal of writing history from below underlies a publication containing letters and appeals from "the common folk" in nineteenth-century Germany. Siegfried Grosse et al., eds., *"Denn das Schrieben gehört nicht zu meiner täglichen Beschäfti-*

Geniza Letters and European "Pauper Letters"

The European "pauper letters" just mentioned play an important background role in the present collection. Though separated geographically, culturally, and chronologically from the Jewish material, they contain remarkable parallels to the Geniza letters and illustrate their value as evidence of structures of history shared across time and across societies with different religions. Moreover, they enable us to evaluate certain methodological problems that need to be addressed—with encouraging results. First comes the question of repetitiousness of language from letter to letter, especially as this relates to "facticity." Second, many of the personal letters of appeal, especially those of the women, may not actually have been written by the indigents themselves, similarly raising questions about the reliability of these documents as witnesses to social history. These issues do not, however, detract from the value of the letters as specimens of the voice of the poor. As Thomas Sokoll writes in his study of "pauper letters" from early industrial England in a comment that is applicable to our case: "It is obvious . . . that in interpreting a pauper letter we have to watch out for stereotypes, exaggerations or even literary make-ups which must not be taken literally. And yet, despite this, we may normally still regard it as a true record of the specific circumstances of an individual case, providing that the account is not grossly inconsistent or unlikely."[14]

Sokoll reminds us, too, that the definition of "author"or "writer" in premodern societies without universal literacy, and even in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, was not sharp. "In the context of the social history of language, terms like 'author,' 'writer,' or 'scribe' are insufficient and inappropriate if understood in their conventional sense. . . . The power of writing is not confined to those who themselves were able to write. It also applies to anyone who *had* a piece being written in a given place at a given time."[15] Moreover, he adds, letters that other people wrote on behalf of the needy provide important, complementary information about their experience of poverty "in that they show to what extent certain attitudes, images and beliefs were shared across social groups, thus providing important insights into the social range of contemporary notions such as the nature of poverty."[16] These observations also hold true for the Geniza letters, as we shall point out.

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gung:" Der Alltag kleiner Leute in Bittschriften, Briefen und Berichten aus dem 19. Jahrhundert: Ein Lesebuch (Bonn, 1989).

[14] Thomas Sokoll, "Old Age in Poverty," 131; idem, *Essex Pauper Letters*, 67–70.

[15] Idem, "Old Age in Poverty," 133–34; idem, *Essex Pauper Letters*, 62–67. James Stephen Taylor, writing about pauper letters addressed to the township of Kirkby Lonsdale, states: "Even if it were the pen of a neighbour or family member, writing out of charity or for a pittance, the voice would not be markedly altered, except in an obvious case"; "Voices in the Crowd," 116.

[16] Sokoll, "Old Age in Poverty," 135.

The attentive reader of the notes and commentaries to the letters below will find fascinating similarities and even stylistic parallels between letters of the Christian poor in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England and Jewish letters from the eleventh to mid-thirteenth centuries. Contemporaneous Islamic ideas of poverty and its relief, and medieval Christian notions of poverty and charity also come into play. All of this illustrates structural features of the history of poverty that our study has confirmed from a previously unknown angle.

The "pauper letters" from England and from other places, it should be stated, while they originate from the poor, differ from the Geniza specimens in some important respects. They are "official" letters—appeals to parish overseers of charity by or on behalf of indigents living in another parish and seeking nonresident or "out-township" relief. By way of contrast, the Geniza specimens are addressed primarily to private individuals. This makes them doubly precious, insofar as they concern the elusive realm of *private charity*. Additionally, the Geniza letters stem from a religious age, and thus religious sentiments permeate their lines. The pauper letters are striking in the absence of religious content. This does not mean that the indigents of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England lacked religious feeling. It means that the medieval people—poor and benefactor alike—lived and breathed religion in a much more fundamental way and believed that charity, as much a duty toward God as toward one's fellow man, made a difference to the Creator. By contrast, the English paupers knew that the handouts they requested were part of a legislated, mandatory, "secular" system—no longer part of a calculus of giving that would bring salvation. Promising to pray to God on behalf of poor law administrators charged by civil law to distribute tax revenues as charity would have sounded a bit out of place.[17]

There remains the question of repetitiveness—also a characteristic of the pauper letters—and what that says about the facticity of our sources. The Geniza letters do show a certain amount of formulaic repetitiousness "at the edges," as the letter writers, or those writing down their stories for them, "shaped narratives" to get results, to use Natalie Zemon Davis's term in *Fiction in the Archives*.[18] Nonetheless, the central core of their stories is believable enough. The kinds of fictional embellishments peppering the fascinating "pardon tales" in Davis's study are largely absent. The Geniza paupers, like Davis's characters, were certainly concerned about their future and that of their families, but the stakes were not so high. Their plight could be mitigated

[17] In a very rare exception, a widow closes her letter of appeal to a parish poor law administrator: "I hope God will bless You for doing good for the fatherless & Widow." Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters*, 519, and again on the same page, a similar blessing by the same widow writing another letter to the same official.

[18] *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1987).

by a simple gift of some cash, food, or an article of clothing. Moreover, even when they had an interesting "story" to tell to explain their indigence, when all is said and done, they had less need to justify themselves than Davis's sixteenth-century French murderers claiming extenuating circumstances before the authorities in order to save their lives. Even in rare instances in our material, such as that of the impoverished widow of the cantor Ben Naḥman—whose moving, dire, and fascinating tale of woe we shall read includes physical violence perpetrated against her—the facts of the cases seem credible enough.

Finally, as the greatest of all Geniza scholars, S. D. Goitein, pointed out, the Geniza is "the very opposite of an archive."[19] Unlike an archive, its contents were not stored for future retrieval, not housed in systematic fashion to enable people later on to find documentation of this or that fact or event. It is a waste bin for discarded papers. Largely uncensored and unmediated, however, and not meant to be read by future generations, the Geniza letters, side by side with the silent evidence of the alms lists and donor registers, allow us to hear the real voice of the poor and to study the strategies they employed to survive in the absence of a well-organized state poor-law mechanism and to avail themselves of the "entitlement" afforded them by the divine command to give charity.[20]

Letters as Petitions

A large number of the letters (the first example is no. 1 below) display the stylistic conventions of the Arabic petition, particularly the classic structure of *arenga-expositio-dispositio*, the introduction, exposition of the case, and request clause characteristic of petitions in the Greco-Roman world and also found in the Jewish Aramaic papyri from Upper Egypt in the fifth century B.C.E.[21] We know a lot about petitions to Muslim rulers in Egypt thanks to medieval Arab authors like al-Qalqashandī, whose epistolographic manual sets forth the stylistic rules for writing petitions and gives examples. *Actual* petitions are to be found among the written remains of the minority communities—in the Monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai, where they were archived for future reference, and in the Cairo Geniza, where they were "buried" because they no longer had use—and among the Arabic papyri, which were dumped into the

[19] *Med. Soc.*, 1:7.

[20] On the usefulness of the concept of "strategies" in the analysis of letters of the poor, see Pamela Sharpe, "Survival Strategies and Stories," 230–32; Sokoll, "Negotiating a Living," 42–46.

[21] See one example in A. Cowley, ed. and trans., *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century* B.C. (1923; reprinted Osnabrück, 1967), 108–122, a petition (two versions, probably drafts) from the Jewish colony in Elephantine to the Persian governor of Judaea; Bezalel Porten et al., eds., *The Elephantine Papyri in English: Three Millennia of Cross-Cultural Continuity and Change* (Leiden, 1996), 139–47.

garbage. The Arabic petitions preserved in the Geniza have been most thoroughly studied by Geoffrey Khan.[22]

The Jews were fully aware of the petition form. Many members of their community worked in the government chancery and so dealt directly and on a daily basis with what al-Qalqashandī describes. Jews also petitioned the Muslim authorities regularly, as the remains of such Arabic petitions (usually drafts) in the Geniza attest. Furthermore, within their own community, individuals addressed petitions in Judaeo-Arabic to *Jewish* communal officials and heads, as well as to private persons, seeking redress of grievances or, in our case, charity.[23] Even Hebrew letters sometimes betray the influence of the form and style of Arabic petitions.

Elsewhere I have argued that the Geniza letters of the poor should not be equated (as they often have been) with the "Schnorrerbriefe" that became common in central and eastern Europe after the middle of the seventeenth century, when pogroms in Poland caused an increase in Jewish mendicancy and vagabondage.[24] Sometimes known in Hebrew as *qibbuṣim* ("collection letters"), these European letters recommend indigents for charity and resemble in function the royal "beggars' licenses" in Christian society that served the same purpose for Christian captives.[25]

The Judaeo-Arabic petitions of the poor in the Geniza functioned, not as an instrument for begging, but as a respectable instrument for obtaining private charity. They were addressed to one person (or group of persons), and meant for a single use, not for repetitive begging from person to person or house to house. A preponderance of the petitioners wrote because they needed temporary assistance to overcome a temporary hardship. And they wished to do this

[22] Geoffrey Khan, *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* (Cambridge, 1993), chapter 12, 302–409. Petitions preserved among the early papyri from Egypt represent an early stage in the evolution of the document's form, prior to the Fatimid period. See Geoffrey Khan, "The Historical Development of the Structure of Medieval Arabic Petitions," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 53 (1990), 8–30. Some Arabic petitions from everyday life have also been discovered among the "late papyri" (which include writings on paper), e.g., Diem, *Arabische Briefe auf Papyrus und Papier aus der Heidelberger Papyrus-Sammlung, Textband*, Index s.v. "Petition," e.g., 30–36 (14th century), and especially interesting, as it demonstrates the use of the petition form inside the other minority community in Egypt, 18–25 (a Christian petition to the Patriarch of Alexandria, 13th century).

[23] See Mark R. Cohen, "Four Judaeo-Arabic Petitions of the Poor from the Cairo Geniza," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 24 (2000), 446–71.

[24] Cohen, "Four Judaeo-Arabic Petitions of the Poor," and Cohen, *Poverty and Charity*, chapter 7.

[25] Examples of the qibbuṣ letters are preserved in the epistles of Rabbi Judah Aryeh Modena (d. 1648 in Venice) (*Iggerot R. Yehuda Aryeh Mi-modena* [Letters of Rabbi Leon Modena], ed. Yacob Boksenboim [Tel Aviv, 1984], e.g., 209–12, 213–15, 224–25, 232–33, 293–94) and in pedagogical manuals like *Iggerot melammedim* (Letters of Jewish Teachers), ed. Yacob Boksenboim (Tel Aviv, 1985), 52, and index s.v. qibbuṣim. On Christian "begging licenses," see Jarbel Rodriguez, "Prisoners of Faith: Christian Captives in the Later Middle Ages" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2001), passim.

privately, "uncovering their faces" to a limited audience. For this purpose, the petition form was ideally suited.[26] It allowed these unfortunates to minimize their embarrassment and to retain some of their dignity by employing a known instrument of Muslim administration and following its diplomatic conventions.

These texts have additional social meaning. The relationship between petitioner and petitioned functioned very much like the ancient and gentlemanly system of patronage that pervaded Near Eastern society. That relationship was characterized by bonding between the benefactor and the recipient of his protection, who prayed to God on behalf of his or her patron in gratitude for a gift bestowed (or anticipated) and would praise him publicly for his generosity. The petition form of Jewish letters of appeal also confirms and is in turn confirmed by patterns of an earlier period in the history of Christian charity. Peter Brown has suggested that the ancient Near Eastern model of petitioning for justice, which entered Christianity through the Hebrew Bible, suffused the new charity of the later Roman Empire, and also led to what he calls an "'upward slippage' of the notion of the 'poor' in Christian texts of the time."[27] His insight about early Christianity—including his claim, among others, that the ancient Near Eastern model was that of plaintiff, rather than beggar—accords with the practice of the later period in the Near East as represented in the Judaeo-Arabic petitions of the poor from the Cairo Geniza.

Society and Culture of the Non-Elite

Incidental to its main focus, this collection has broader significance for medieval social and cultural history. It offers insight into the society and culture of the underclass, normally hidden from the historian's gaze. We hear about their personal hardships, about their debts, about illness and unemployment, about the anxiety produced by being "cut off" (in their language) from income or from family assistance—subjects often omitted from chronicles and other literary sources. The collection also introduces the normally mute voice of women, describing their adversities and sometimes the travails of their marriages, while at the same time revealing the strategies they employed, taking

[26] "Pauper letters" (Christian, not Jewish) in Germany in the nineteenth century had a formal structure similar to the diplomatic scheme of the petition of antiquity. They were "official" written appeals, addressed to public authorities, following the prohibition of begging in Prussia at the beginning of the nineteenth century. See Siegfried Grosse et al., eds., "*Denn das Schrieben gehört nicht zu meiner täglichen Beschäftigung*," 29–30, and Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters*, 57. For the petition form in pauper letters from England, see Taylor, "Voices in the Crowd," 111, 115. The Geniza letters, it must be reiterated, display features of the classical and Arabic petition, but most of them are requests for *private* charity. They offer an opportunity to respond to Sokoll's lament about the dearth of "comparative research into the social history of petitioning." Ibid, 60.

[27] Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH, and London, 2002), 69–73.

charge of their lives when they could, to protect themselves and their children from privation. Our letters are peppered, further, with unmediated access to family relationships as well as to relationships between the common folk and the Jewish officialdom. Everywhere, whether it be in the letters or in the alms lists, we encounter the mobile society of the Islamic Mediterranean, especially what we call here the foreign poor, and we even meet people, sometimes as refugees, coming from Europe into the Islamic orbit. This perspective complements the better known life of the merchants of the Geniza portrayed so fascinatingly by Goitein.[28]

On the cultural side, the letters accurately reflect the religiosity of the average Jew, from the religious motivation to give charity, based on biblical and rabbinic instruction, to ideas of poverty centered in traditional Jewish texts or echoing concepts floating around in the Muslim environment. We sense the mentality of the *Homo religiosus*, always offering prayers and frequently expressing hopes for divine redemption. We hear, further, about relations between the Jews of Egypt and the community in Palestine, which held a special place in Jewish religious consciousness. This was enhanced by close geographical and political affiliation, as Palestine belonged then to the Muslim empire centered in Cairo (except when occupied by the conquering Christian Crusaders). As a cultural artifact, the letters themselves represent prize examples of the Arabic and Hebrew epistolography of people from the non-elite of society, differing from though in some ways based upon the letter-writing of Arab high society, exemplified in the many Arabic epistolographic manuals from the Middle Ages. The Judaeo-Arabic petitions themselves constitute another genre of Arabic literature that Jews adopted from their surroundings during the great Judaeo-Arabic acculturation of the Middle Ages, an aspect of the topic that remains to be systematically investigated. The society and culture of the non-elite and their mentality, often missing from medieval literary sources (Muslim and Jewish alike), shine brightly in the letters of and about the poor originating in the Cairo Geniza.

By way of introduction we present in chapter 1 several letters that illustrate basic themes about poverty and charity in the Geniza. Many of these themes are then revisited in a more focused way in subsequent chapters, as we apply the cases at hand to illuminate larger questions in the history of the poor and poor relief. The chapters that follow deal with the taxonomy of the poor (chapter 2), the foreign poor (chapter 3), indigent captives and refugees (chapter 4), debt and the poll tax (chapter 5), women and poverty (chapter 6), and public charity (chapter 7). They focus mainly on the poor and their plight and the strategies they employed to obtain assistance, but they pertain to charity as well. Part 2 deals with public charity as reflected in alms lists and

[28] S. D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton, 1973).

donor accounts (chapters 8 and 9). Part 3, the epilogue (chapter 10), contains a set of letters emanating from the office of the head of the Jews Joshua Nagid (d. 1355), the great-great grandson of Maimonides, illustrating poverty and charity in the fourteenth century, a period of decline in the Jewish as well as the general economy in Egypt.

In the nature of things, a single document often speaks to more than one theme. The general index will enable readers to locate information in the book no matter where it may be.